

“Rising from the Ashes”

With all of the negative news we are hearing and the unprecedented changes that are occurring in the world, is it any wonder that we find ourselves nervous and confused? Concerns about the economy, environment, job losses, government intervention, Wall Street greed, rising crime, loss of traditional values, etc., are permeating the airways. Many people sense that this downturn does not feel the same as previous cycles. Most would agree that everything seems to be shifting and that things which worked before no longer work today.

Something dramatic is happening; something new is trying to be born. Vaclav Havel, former President of Czechoslovakia and renowned author, states: “I think there are good reasons for suggesting that the modern age has ended. Today, many things indicate that we are going through a transitional period, when it seems something is on the way out and something else is painfully being born. It is as if something were crumbling, decaying, and exhausting itself--while something else, still indistinct, were rising from the rubble.”

Business owners and managers are facing a major crossroads from which paths lead in two directions: one is well-known and perceptively smooth, while the other is one that few have traveled before.

In tough times, when we choose the familiar path, we as business managers might take restrictive measures by getting out the knife and cutting costs. This is a road that many have traversed before. It is a safe and certain path, and we know where it leads. Following it, we assume a command and control model of leadership. In times of economic turmoil, the standard approach is to lay people off, cut unnecessary expenses, reduce prices to maintain cash flow when required, and find ways to steal competitors' customers. It's called survival. This may be necessary in order to stay afloat. There is also a tendency to start blaming others for the demise of the economy, such as government, Wall Street, the practice of outsourcing, unions, etc. We try to hang on to something and become more cynical, judgmental and fearful. We get stuck in old ways of thinking and managing and wait for things to turn a round.

The other path is the road less traveled. Few leaders and managers have felt comfortable admitting that they don't know what to do in times like these. It is extremely difficult for the traditional business leader to travel this path because of the vulnerability that accompanies it, and because a certain degree of humility is required in order for one to admit that he/she is not sure what to do next. Yet this is the path of recovery and renewal, and to follow it we must discard our old ways of thinking and acting; we must allow them to dissipate and crumble. In order to adapt to a new world it is necessary to reach deep within ourselves and our organizations and to listen attentively to what we are called to do. What other purpose might we serve than making money? How, as a citizen of the world community, do we justify our worth and value to society? It is essential that we understand the meaning and purpose of our life and our business and why it has the

right to exist. Would the world be less if we or our business did not exist? If we answer 'yes', then, and only then, can we begin to find ways to rise from the rubble.

Margaret Wheatley in her book 'Turning to One Another' writes that "There is no power greater than a community (organization) discovering what it cares about. Ask 'What's Possible?' not 'What's Wrong?' Keep asking...Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters." What kind of conversations are we having with others in these challenging times? Are the conversations about fear and doubt or about opportunities and possibilities? Do we have the faith and courage to face fear and uncertainty and to discover new meaning? The desire to find meaning and to make a difference is what motivates people. Serving others is what brings us joy.

Once we pursue dialogue with each other and imagine new and innovative ways of adding value to the world, we will begin to be born again. Discovering new possibilities and opportunities is essential to healthy growth. We cannot, however, be creative unless we are first confused. If the chaos and turbulence has your head spinning you are in the right place. The next step is to share your concerns and confusion with others and listen to what they have to say. None of us can find our way through the chaos alone. We need each other.